DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 134 EA 016 228

AUTHOR Bosse, Jerry
TITLE Transportation in the Millard School District.
PUB DATE [Apr 83]
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Board Association (San Francisco, CA, April 23-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ancillary School Services; Budgets; *Bus Transportation; Elementary Secondary Education; Expenditures; Inflation (Economics); Operating Expenses; *School Buses; School District Spending; *Student Transportation
IDENTIFIERS Millard School District NE

ABSTRACT

Due to increasing costs for bus service, the Millard School District in Nebraska has instituted a successful plan whereby students pay partially for bus service by purchasing coupon books. While elementary students more than one mile away are still bused at district expense, junior high students more than two miles away must pay the partial cost in order to ride the bus. (High school students are reimbursed for their own transportation, since a second high school has obviated the need for bus service.) The system has resulted in a 39 percent reduction in the transportation budget, even though the district still offers safe transportation for junior high students who need it. Other advantages include allocation of transportation costs to users, thus reducing tax burdens; and greater control and flexibility for the district in financing its transportation program and adjusting for future contingencies. Another cost-saving move is a switch from gasoline to propane as bus fuel. As a consequence of these measures, the Millard School District has managed to cut costs substantially, without affecting educational quality. (TE)

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TRANSPORTATION IN THE MILLARD SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Jerry Bosse A-12

TRANSPORTATION IN THE MILLARD SCHOOL DISTRICT

Although our school district, with 13,000 students, is probably much smaller than many of the systems represented here, the program we implemented two years ago in which student pay part of the cost of their bus service, could be adapted to a district of any size.

Background

Just to give you some background, the Millard School District is a suburban system in Omaha covering 35 square miles. During the past 10 years, our enrollment more than doubled. We now have 16 elementary schools, two junior highs for 7th and 8th grades, and two four-year high schools.

As new subdivisions were developed, the need for transportation services increased dramatically. The district had to look at the future of the transportation program, considering the safety of students, the increasing costs of bus service and the need to help conserve energy.

For several years, we provided bus service for students in grades 7 through 10 who live more than two miles from school, and for elementary students living more than one mile from school.

Nebraska law doesn't provide much help for school districts. It requires that students who live more than four miles from school receive bus service or reimbursement from the district. State funds for transportation are minimal. We are reimbursed only for those students who live more than four miles from school. For example, our transportation budget this year is over $366,000, and we will receive only an estimated $9,000 reimbursement from the state.

Contract Service

Several years ago, the district made an in-depth study to determine whether it should launch a large-scale district-operated bus system, or contract with a commercial bus company.

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The study showed that although contract service might be more costly over a long period, the first five years would be comparable because of the large cost outlay needed to begin a district-operated program.

Contract service also provides more flexibility as the need for buses increases in our growing district, so we began contracting for bus service.

Partial Student Pay Plan

As budget restrictions increased, the Board was faced with deciding whether it could continue to fund the service at its present level at the possible expense of instructional programs. A trend for the future of the transportation program needed to be established.

The Board studied more than a dozen different alternatives, looking for one that would decrease the district's share of the cost while still providing adequate service for students.

The plan adopted maintained bus service, at district expense, for elementary students living more than one mile from school. We were able to eliminate district-operated service for high school students because implementation of this plan coincided with the opening of our second high school. This meant that too few high school students live more than four miles from school to make providing bus service economical, so they are reimbursed for transportation.

Junior high students who live less than two miles from school must walk or provide their own transportation. Students who live more than two miles may ride a bus by paying part of the cost for the service.

Among the factors we considered in adopting this plan was, of course, cost. Since Nebraska law does not provide funding for transportation at the level of most other states, the only method we have to pay for expanding transportation costs is through increasing property taxes.

This plan provides options for us, as well as for the students. For example, we have the flexibility to expand the partial pay program to other

grade levels. In fact the Board voted earlier this month to extend the program to elementary students in one part of the district.

We can also increase the student share of the cost, if necessary. If we want to encourage more students to ride the bus, we can lower their cost.

Another important factor was saving energy. If we had decided not to provide any transportation for junior high students, the result would have been many more parents driving to and from school every day.

Management

Before school opens in the fall, questionnaires are mailed to parents of all eligible students, asking them to indicate whether they will use the partial-pay service. bus routes are established from the results of this questionnaire.

Students who ride the bus are required to present a coupon to the driver each time they ride, so they only pay for the service when they use it. Coupons, sold at each junior high by the school secretary on specific days, are available in books of 20 for $7.50 or books of 40, at $15.

In other words, students pay 75 cents a day round trip or 37 1/2 cents each time they ride.

In order to get the best use of each bus, we stagger the starting times of the two junior highs, with one beginning classes half an hour later than the other. This allows us to use the same buses for both schools.

As we considered alternative types of transportation programs, it was important to be able to estimate how many students might use a partial pay service. Our transportation director estimated that about 55 percent of the eligible students would participate, and the first year's actual figure was 56 percent. This year, ridership has increased to 59 percent of the students who are eligible.

One problem we anticipated was that students would buy coupons but not ride the bus on a regular basis. We were concerned that many of these

infrequent riders would appear at bus stops on stormy days, for example, resulting in overcrowded buses. However, that hasn't been a major problem, despite Nebraska's famous winters.

Parents of high school students who had previously received bus service at no cost to them were, of course, unhappy with the new policy. To help ease the pain, the district worked with the contract bus company to provide bus routes for which parents pay the full cost as part of their contract.

Cost

The change to a partial pay program helped the district reduce its transportation budget:

1980-81	1981-82	Savings
$555,559	$337,367	$218,192
2.8% of total district budget	1.5% of total district budget	39% reduction in transportation budget

Part of this saving was due to elimination of high school service.

Total cost of partial pay program for 1981-82 -- $122,368

Income from coupon sale -- $62,585

District's cost -- $59,783

Parents pay approximately 52 percent of the cost; district pays 48 percent.

We can expect the district's savings to be even larger this year, since ridership has increased, making our income from coupon sales greater.

Advantages

- The district is still offering safe transportation for junior high students who live more than two miles from school.

- Students and their parents have the option of using district transportation if they wish to do so.

- Only those students who use the service are paying for it, decreasing the tax burden on all residents.

- Transportation expense for the district is reduced, and future cost increases can be passed on to those who use the service.

- The school district has more control over the financial aspect of the transportation program, with flexibility for expanding the partial pay system to other grade levels, and to raise or lower prices as necessary.

Use of Propane

Another cost-saving move we've made is requesting that transportation bids include alternative fuels. As a result, the bus company that has our contract is using propane this year, saving us over $18,000 compared to the cost of gasoline.

With our school budget becoming tighter each year, our Board takes the position that when cuts must be made, we will look first at services that will not affect the quality of education our students receive. We feel the reductions we've made in transportation costs meet that requirement.